

WILLIAM HOLLAND WILMER

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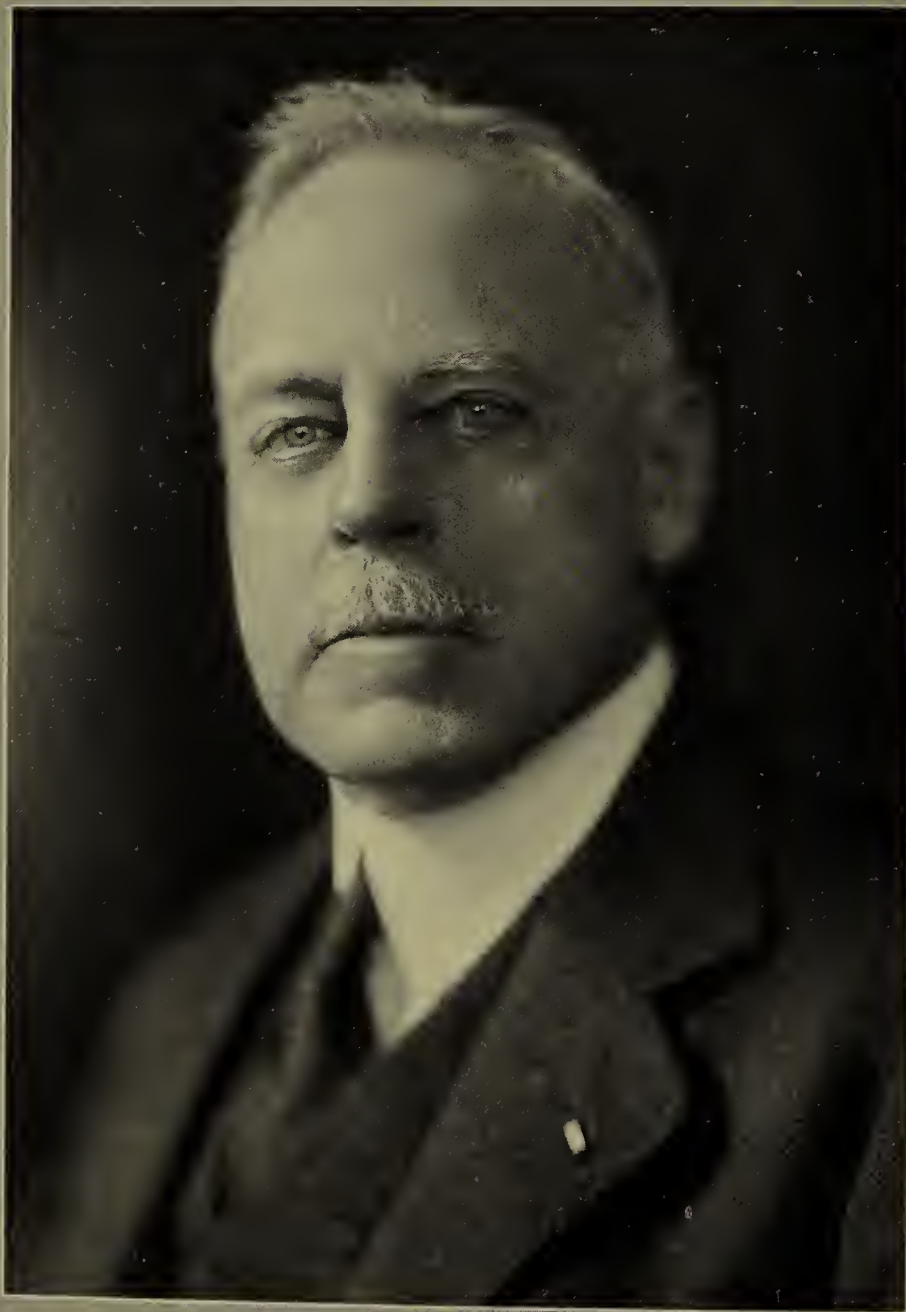
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WILLIAM HOLLAND WILMER
1863-1936

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And when he fell, at sunset, he went down
As when a mighty cedar, green with boughs,
Goes down with a great shout upon the hill
And leaves a lonesome place against the sky.
—Edwin Markham.

THE sudden death on March 12 of Dr. William Holland Wilmer leaves its “lonesome place” in the ranks of pioneers in the science of ophthalmology and surgery of the human eye. Of first importance in his profession,—as operating technician and teacher, he kept his dynamic and winning personality to the sunset of his days, and passed from this life laden with all the honor in the power of grateful patients and respecting colleagues to bestow.

For many years I was associated with Dr. Wilmer, first as student, later as friend and colleague; and I find it difficult to write of him with the calm and dispassionate pen of a true biographer. His skill as an operator, his aptitude for the speedy technique so necessary in many eye operations, in addition to his rare ability as an inspired clinician and his unusually keen flair for imparting his knowledge made those of us who studied under him feel fortunate indeed.

Dr. Wilmer's career ran true to the promise of his distinguished ancestry. He was the son of the Right Rev. Richard Hooker Wilmer and Margaret Brown Wilmer. His father was the Protestant Episcopal Bishop of the diocese of Alabama. Their son, a native of Powhatan County, Virginia, born August 26, 1863, had the best of youthful educational opportunities, and he made the most of them. He received his medical degree from the University of Virginia in 1885.

He went immediately into an internship at Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York, where he served for 18 months, the first part of the time in general medicine, and later as resident in surgery. He then became an assistant to Dr. Emile Greening in private practice, and at the same time was able to teach at the New York Polyclinic Hospital. Later he became connected with the clinic of Dr. Agnew, the ophthalmologist in New York. It was during this period that he attended his own first private patients.

In the fall of 1889 he actively entered the field to which he was to devote his life's energies and began the practice of ophthalmology in Washington, D. C.

Rapidly, through his manifold abilities, he achieved such distinction in his profession that honors were heaped upon him. He found time from his busy practice to be professor of ophthalmology at Georgetown University and at the same time surgeon of the Episcopal Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital in Washington. In 1919 Georgetown conferred on him the degree of LL.D. The last degree that Dr. Wilmer was to receive was that same mark of honor, given by the Johns Hopkins University only a few weeks before his death.

From his first days as a practitioner Dr. Wilmer had had a splendid command of languages and had added to his first income by translating for some of the older surgeons. As the years went by, he was able to travel in Europe and visit the famous clinics there, including Morfield, in England, and at the famous clinic in Vienna of the great Dr. Adolph Fuchs, whose intimate friend he became.

Dr. Wilmer was, at the outbreak of the World War, a lieutenant in the Army Medical Reserve Corps. He was immediately commissioned as major, and placed in charge of the Air Service Medical Research Laboratories at Mineola, Long Island. As a director and inspiring force for those engaged in original research there he attained such recognition that in August, 1918, at the request of General Pershing, he was sent to France to become the chief of the Army's overseas medical laboratories. He left the service with the rank of brigadier-general. He was awarded the distinguished service medal on the citation of General Pershing. Later, in 1924, he was made a commander of the French Legion d'Honneur.

Following his war service, Dr. Wilmer re-entered his private practice at Washington, which he renewed with an ever-growing success. So many were his distinguished patients that when, in later years, he moved to Baltimore his examination chair was dubbed by the students the "Presidents' chair." Five of the chief executives of the United States had sat there as Dr. Wilmer's patients.

It was strange, to those of us who knew Dr. Wilmer intimately, how occurred the growth of the public recognition of his greatness as an operator, diagnostician, and clinician, for he abhorred personal publicity and his professional life and works he attempted to keep a closed chapter, save as admiring associates might make them known.

In fact, it was indicative of this aversion to personal promotion that he became violently opposed to the use of the telephone. He insisted that telephoning was a waste of time. All his appointments had to be made by letter, and he was meticulously on time. His patients entered his office, one might say, on the stroke of a bell. His busy office in Washington had a silent telephone and there was no listing in the directory. At least from the time he came to Baltimore until his death, he rarely ever engaged in a telephone conversation.

For lack of time Dr. Wilmer was not able to gratify as fully as he would have liked his own urge for ophthalmological research. Yet he recognized keenly the need of original inquiry in the field of the human eye, and ever bent his efforts

toward providing greater opportunities for others who came under his tutelage.

In 1922 his ability and sincere devotion to his patients crystallized into such an opportunity. A group of those he had served joined together and raised a fund of \$3,000,000 known as the William Holland Wilmer Ophthalmological Fund. This sum was used in the building of a model structure at the Johns Hopkins Hospital. It was named the Wilmer Institute and in 1925 Dr. Wilmer was installed as its director, also as professor of ophthalmology and ophthalmologist-in-chief of the Johns Hopkins Hospital.

This institution Dr. Wilmer made a living monument to his work and ideals, as he saw to it that no effort was spared to provide within its walls every possible aid to research. The most scientific and delicate problems of the science of ophthalmology were given to the research workers who joined the staff of the Institute. They labored under the direct guidance and inspiration of Dr. Wilmer, who spent long hours in the laboratories. From these laboratories have come many valuable contributions, responsible in no small measure for much of the advance made in ophthalmology during the past decade.

Significant of the humanity and generosity of the character of the man. Dr. Wilmer insisted that at least three-fourths of the beds at the Wilmer Institute should be for charity patients. He made his daily rounds of these wards and performed many of the complicated operations on those who were without funds. On the occasion of such operations, the entire staff of the Institute would attend as would many of the younger men from other departments of the hospital. Attendance at these events were experiences that stand vivid in the memories of us all.

As the years swept on, the Wilmer Institute grew in service to humanity and in importance to the profession with amazing rapidity. Patients came from all over the world. From many nations poured the requests for posts on the house staff.

Although he had never been a prolific writer, Dr. Wilmer for years had dreamed of what was to be his monumental literary contribution to medical science,—his *Atlas of the Eye*. With the services of an unusual house artist at his command, whom he had trained to use the ophthalmoscope, and in possession of a wealth of most extraordinary material from his own clinical experience, few members of his professional specialty were equipped as he was for such a task. He devoted many hours getting together the outline of what was to be this work, and months and years of labor went into its actual production. In July of 1934 it was given to the profession,—a volume of impressive value, containing 100 illustrations of fundi in full color, each with the author's description and comment on the opposite page.

This work was not only an important contribution to ophthalmological knowledge, it was a practical working out of what had long been Dr. Wilmer's

principle of teaching and practice. He always had impressed on his students the value of picturizing what they saw within the eye and on the surface also, in making examinations and diagnoses. He developed a set of rubber stamps which could serve as a sort of series of outline maps of the normal exterior and interior surfaces of the eye. In making clinical records it was his teaching and practice to use these stamps, subsequently marking them so as to record infallibly the various abnormalities observed. Thus Dr. Wilmer's *Atlas* was another case of "hewing to the line" in following the precepts learned in his long and successful practice.

The honors that have come to Dr. Wilmer, both before and since his retirement from the Hopkins at the age of seventy, have been many. Perhaps the climax of these was the occasion of the opening of the Institute. This was conducted with much formality and ceremony, and many of Dr. Wilmer's distinguished patients and the humbler ones as well held a reunion as the building was formally dedicated. Perhaps, however, to Dr. Wilmer there was no greater honor than that his friend of long standing, Dr. Fuchs, made the long journey from Europe to address the throng assembled on the lawn before the Institute.

In addition to the LL.D. degrees he received from Georgetown (of which he was a Regent) and from the Johns Hopkins, he was given the Sc.D. by Princeton. He also found time for many associational activities, in most of which he took great interest, and in some of which he served as active leader.

He was a member of the board of directors of the National Committee for the Prevention of Blindness and of the Advisory Committee for the Prevention of Hereditary Blindness. He was a fellow of the American College of Surgeons and a member of the editorial staff of this Journal, its official organ, a member of the National Institute of Social Science; of the Committee on Mental Hygiene; honorary member of the Oxford Ophthalmological Society (England); Hungarian Ophthalmological Society; Chicago Ophthalmological Society; and the Saranac Medical Society. He was a member of several patriotic organizations and veterans' groups.

Dr. Wilmer had served as president of the American Ophthalmological Society, of the Army and Navy Air Service Association; the Medical Alumni of the University of Virginia; Association of Military Surgeons of the United States and the Society of the Cincinnati of New Jersey.

He was ever active in the church and took a considerable part in the up-building of the Protestant Episcopal Cathedral in Washington. He was buried in the Chapel of St. Joseph of Arimathea at the Cathedral. One of the honors of which he was most proud was his award, in 1932, of the decoration of the Angelo Secchi Academy of Science at Georgetown University.

His personal life was as full and felicitous as was his professional career. In 1891 he was married to Re Lewis Smith of Pennsylvania. She and their three

children, Richard Hooker and William Holland, Jr., and Mrs. Russell E. Sard, survive him.

Dr. Wilmer and Mrs. Wilmer were both passionately fond of gardening. About equally distant from Washington and Baltimore—at Boyce, Va., in the heart of the apple country—they found a lovely farm in a shady valley fronting a fine view of a nearby mountain ridge. There Dr. Wilmer began his collection of evergreens which has been declared without a parallel in this country. He grew and tended with care almost every variety cultivable in the Virginia latitude. Knowing of his work, the federal agricultural authorities leaned on his knowledge of evergreen trees and oftentimes it was he who first determined whether imported varieties were cultivable in the United States. When the *Atlas of the Eye* was finished, it was Dr. Wilmer's intention, indeed, to write an authoritative work on evergreen culture. It is unfortunate that much of the priceless tree lore he acquired during the years passed away with him.

Indefatigable in his profession, and with this avocation as a means of relaxing from the normal fatigue of his enormous activity, Dr. Wilmer went to his death without the usual curbing and circumscribings that we term "declining years." In fact, on Tuesday, March 10, two days before he died, he had scheduled a list of operations for the day. Friends in Washington had urged him to hold a meeting at his Washington home at which could be organized a branch Society for the Prevention of Blindness in the national capital.

Dr. Wilmer postponed all his operations except one, Tuesday afternoon. He held the meeting, and the organization was formed. Two days later he was preparing to go to his office for his usual busy day when he was fatally stricken.

The death of Dr. Wilmer is a severe loss to ophthalmology. But to those of us who had the rare privilege of working with him, the loss is that of our truest friend.

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